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ABSTRACT

This report explores the literature on developing and sustaining high-performing schools. First, common characteristics of low-performing schools are described, such as the combination of community poverty, low expectations for student achievement, high teacher absenteeism, and high rates of teacher turnover. Schools that succeed despite poverty show a strong focus on the instructional program, a strong planning process focused on improving student achievement, and a culture of collaboration among teaching staff and administration. Some short-term strategies for moving schools forward quickly include aligning written and taught curricula with standards, aligning local and classroom assessment with curriculum, monitoring student progress, and analyzing student achievement data to identify critical needs. Improvement can be sustained by determining the readiness of the faculty and community to change practices, and developing a common vision, mission, values, and core beliefs for student achievement. External facilitation can assist school personnel in assessing needs and developing strategic improvement plans. Federal funds can be targeted to help low-performing schools improve student achievement. To ensure strong school leadership, school districts must provide professional development opportunities for school leaders and establish a culture that encourages distributing leadership functions to members of the school and community. (Contains 53 references.) (RT)

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A Review of Research Literature On Low-Performing Schools

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Christopher Corallo, Ed.D.
Deborah McDonald, Ed.D.

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AEL is a catalyst for schools and communities to build lifelong learning systems that harness resources, research, and practical wisdom. AEL serves as the Regional Educational Laboratory for Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia. For these same four states, it operates the Eisenhower Regional Consortium for Mathematics and Science Education. The Region IV Comprehensive Center at AEL serves North and South Carolina in addition to these states. AEL also operates the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools.

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PROLOGUE

This report on what works in developing high-performing schools and what it takes to sustain them had its impetus in an international colloquium sponsored by the Regional Educational Laboratory at AEL, Inc. and its partner, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. Participants in the colloquium included members of the AEL research and development staff, Andy Hargreaves and Amanda Datnow of OISE, and a cadre of researchers recognized for their work with developing high-performing schools. Teams of educational leaders from the states in the geographic region served by AEL's laboratory (Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia) also played a key role in the colloquium.

The purpose of the colloquium was to illuminate the issues states face in implementing and sustaining effective school reform efforts by bringing the work of key researchers to bear on the issues. Two of the state teams (Virginia and West Virginia) suggested that research-based answers to several of the recurring questions raised at the colloquium would help inform their work as well as the work of other states. This document addresses that request.

What are the characteristics of low-performing schools?

There is little in the existing literature describing specific characteristics of low-performing schools. Common conditions do, however, appear to be present in these schools. These conditions include a correlation between community poverty and stress on the organization of the school. The stress is evidenced by low expectations for student achievement, high teacher absenteeism, and high rates of teacher turnover. There is, on the other hand, a substantial body of literature describing schools that succeed despite community poverty. The characteristics of these schools include

- a strong focus on, and cohesion of, the instructional program
- a strong planning process focused on improving student achievement
- a culture of collaboration among the teaching staff and administrators

The characteristics of low-performing schools depend on the criteria used to define "low performing." In an environment of standards-based reform, "low performing" often refers to those schools that do not meet the standards established and monitored by the state board of education, or some other authority external to the school.

Reasons for low performance vary from school to school (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). State and local standards, though they may be based on common national standards, vary from state to state and locality to locality. Hence, assessments based on state or other standards differ and contribute to varying criteria for low performance. Even given this variety of state and local standards and assessments, when performance is measured by achievement on nationally normed assessments, low-performing schools share some common conditions. These include a correlation between community poverty and stress on the organization of the school (Puma,

Karweit, Price, Ricciutti, Thompson, & Vaden-Kiernan, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

Many low-performing schools are located in impoverished communities where circumstances make it difficult for students to come to school prepared to learn. This challenge can stretch school resources. The stigma that surrounds designation as a school with low student achievement can also place stress on the school. These stresses contribute to reduced expectations for student achievement as well as increases in teacher absenteeism and turnover rates.

While the research literature indicates a correlation between community poverty and stress on the organization of the school, these factors do not consistently predict low performance. In fact, a substantial body of literature describes characteristics of schools that succeed despite adverse conditions (Cotton, 2000; Reavis & Griffith, 1992). These schools have been found to have (1) a strongly focused and cohesive instructional program, (2) a strong planning process focused on student achievement, and (3) a culture of collaboration among the teaching staff. Each of these characteristics is discussed more fully below.

1. A focus on, and cohesion of, the instructional program. Schools that are successful in a standards-based accountability environment have a strong focus on aligning curriculum with the standards on which the accountability system is based. In these schools, alignment extends beyond the written curriculum. It includes the curriculum that is actually taught, the manner in which it is taught, and classroom assessments (Chrispeels, Strait, & Brown, 1999; Holcomb, 1999). For example, if the content of the standards and the content of the curriculum match, student performance will still lag if the level of cognitive demand required by the standards differs from the cognitive demands reflected in classroom instruction and/or assessment. For

example, the standards require "analysis" and "evaluation" of content, but classroom assessments require "recall" and "recognition" of the same content, then the students will not be well prepared to perform on the standards-based accountability exams. Also, clear articulation of both vertical and horizontal curriculum alignment (i.e., between and among grade levels) is essential (Education Trust, 1999; Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). A corresponding focus on learning outcomes within a coherent instructional program ensures that every student is challenged.

It must be noted, however, that "strong instructional coherence ultimately depends on the educational legitimacy of the aims for students embedded in the school's instructional program" (Newmann, et al., 2001). The educational legitimacy of standards that are perceived as being externally imposed may be difficult for some school faculty to accept. Resistance to externally imposed standards is related to faculty beliefs that they understand the needs of their students and are better able to determine the educational aims than "outsiders." They see externally imposed standards as hampering their academic and professional freedom (Holcomb, 1999; Newmann, et al., 2001).

Even when the educational legitimacy of the standards is accepted, the alignment of externally imposed standards with internally developed curricula and instructional efforts often occurs without a clear understanding of the standards. Agreement with standards that educators do not understand is problematic and may render local implementation strategies ineffective.

Internal solutions to such issues are often difficult at best. Schools that have succeeded in a standards-based environment have made use of both external and internal facilitation to bring focus and cohesion to the instructional program. External facilitation can help in bringing understanding and clear articulation of standards. When external facilitation accompanies

internal facilitation by local school leaders, focus and cohesion of the instructional program result. External facilitators can also assist with the incorporation of data analysis to measure the integrity and effects of standards implementation. While external facilitation can add an element of pressure, internal facilitation can provide a buffer and support the creation of a collaborative culture (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991).

Schools that succeed in a standards-based accountability environment use student achievement data to shape or monitor their work to ensure focus of the instructional program. Data analysis and disaggregation are essential for identifying and solving issues of curriculum, assessment, and instructional alignment (U.S. Department of Education, 1998; WestEd, 2000), yet data analysis has not been naturally occurring in school environments.

Professional development aligned with identified instructional needs is another characteristic of successful schools. Professional development activities that increase student achievement are aligned to needs revealed by student achievement data, and are varied in approach and design (U.S. Department of Education, 1998; WestEd, 2000). Professional development, therefore, must be an integral part of the school plan and closely aligned with ongoing analysis of student needs to ensure focus and cohesion of the instructional program.

2. A strong planning process focused on improving student achievement. Schools that successfully improve student achievement in a standards-based environment meet shared goals through focused planning based on analyses of student data (Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993). Implementation of standards-based instruction is carefully monitored by measuring incremental success toward common goals (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; WestEd, 2000). Documentation of implementation measures is maintained and short- and long-term successes are celebrated

(Levine & Lezotte, 1995; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Plans for improving student achievement are developed and monitored collaboratively by faculty and staff.

3. A culture of collaboration among the teaching staff and administrators. Schools that succeed despite adverse conditions are often organized so teachers can collaborate (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). For example, common planning time may be provided for groups of teachers. Time may also be provided for teachers to observe one another in the classroom. Through such activities these schools develop a culture of collaboration and communication within the faculty. Teachers and administrators foster an environment of professional respect and "esprit de corps" that focuses effort on the work of the school, rather than the work of any individual. A shared focus on student achievement permeates these successful schools (McDonald, 2001).

Communication about the school's focused plan of action extends to the community beyond the school, e.g., parents, as well as business and industry leaders. Such communication results in shared, high expectations for student achievement, a set of common goals designed to meet those expectations, and a true sense that, through combined and individual effort, students can and will achieve at high levels (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 1998; WestEd, 2000).

Summary

While community poverty is often associated with low-performing schools, a substantial body of literature describes schools that become high performing despite this condition. In studying the characteristics of these high-performing schools, organizational and cultural deficits can be hypothesized to occur in low-performing schools. These include a lack of focus on, and

cohesion of, the instructional program, isolation of the teaching staff, and a lack of planning focused on improving student achievement.

Knowing that policymakers cannot or do not always allow sufficient time for sustainable change, and also knowing that sustainable change takes time, what are some effective ways to move schools forward quickly?

Research on school reform indicates that it takes an average of three years for an elementary school to implement change that will improve student achievement. Secondary schools take six years, on the average, to implement such change (Fullan, 2000). In a standards-based, accountability environment, schools must reform quickly. While some short-term strategies may achieve initial gains in student achievement, these are at best "quick fixes" designed to provide incentive for more lasting change. To maintain the momentum, schools must take a long-term approach that addresses the organizational and cultural changes needed to sustain improved student achievement. Descriptions of both short-term strategies and longer-term approaches follow.

Short-term strategies for moving schools forward quickly include

- aligning written and taught curricula with standards
- aligning local and classroom assessments with curriculum and continuously monitoring student progress
- analyzing student achievement data, including groups such as minorities and special education students, to identify the most critical needs for which immediate, common achievement goals and strategies may be developed
- finding leadership for putting structures in place to monitor both the instructional program and student progress toward meeting achievement goals

- providing professional development directly linked to the needs of the faculty to effectively implement the instructional program
- providing additional learning time for students who need it

Long-term strategies for sustaining improvement include

- determining the readiness of the faculty and the community beyond the school to change practices and use data in planning for change
- developing and/or affirming a common vision, mission, values, and core beliefs for student achievement
- fostering faculty collaboration and distributed leadership

Short-Term Strategies

School improvement literature indicates that some schools working to "jumpstart" student achievement gains have found implementing selected strategies to be particularly effective. Those strategies include (1) aligning written and taught curricula with standards, (2) aligning local assessments with curriculum, (3) continuously monitoring student progress toward achievement of standards, (4) disaggregating student achievement data to identify the most critical needs for which immediate, common achievement goals and strategies may be developed, (5) finding leadership for putting structures in place to monitor both the instructional program and student progress toward meeting achievement goals, (6) providing professional development directly linked to the needs of the faculty to implement the instructional program, and (7) providing additional learning time for students who need it. Supporting information is now provided for each short-term strategy.

1. Aligning written and taught curricula with standards. Many schools have improved student achievement by closely aligning their curricula with the standards used to measure achievement (Berman & Chambliss, 2000; Dana Center, 2000; Levine & Lezotte, 1995; Newmann, et al., 2001). When the aligned curriculum is used daily in classroom instruction, students are prepared for test taking as they learn curricular material.

2. Aligning classroom assessments with curriculum and continuously monitoring student progress toward achievement of standards. Many schools have improved student achievement by closely aligning their student assessment program with the curriculum. Assessments are utilized throughout the school year to continually monitor student achievement and adjust instruction (Dana Center, 1999; Fullan, 2000; Levine & Lezotte, 1995; Newmann, et al., 2001).

3. Analyzing student achievement data to identify the most critical needs for which immediate and/or common achievement goals and strategies may be developed. Selecting a visible and attainable goal is important for accelerating the change process (Dana Center, 1999, Levine & Lezotte, 1995; Newmann, et al., 2001; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Many schools improve student achievement by analyzing student achievement data to make decisions about instruction and inform decision making at both the school and classroom levels. They identify critical issues at the school level. Data analysis helps them select appropriate instructional interventions to meet the needs of individual students or groups of students (e.g., students of limited English proficiency).

4. Finding leadership for putting structures in place to monitor both the instructional program and student progress toward meeting achievement goals. Schools

with high levels of student achievement often strategically develop goals using data, and carefully craft and monitor the implementation of strategies to meet the goals. (Berman & Chambliss, 2000; Cotton, 2000; Dana Center, 1999; Fullan, 2000; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000; Walberg, 1984). Data are used to consistently measure student progress against the goals (Levine & Lezotte, 1995; Leithwood & Aitken, 1995; Schmoker, 1996; Sparks, 2000). Someone at the school must coordinate effective identification, implementation, and monitoring of goals, and often the principal accepts leadership for school organization around shared goals.

The principal is key in helping the entire staff focus on data analysis to monitor the instructional program (Holcomb, 1999; Olson, 2000). When data are used to ignite change, the effect can be a powerful, immediate initiative as well as a prelude to sustainable reform because educators are learning the skill of planning based on data analysis (Aldersebaes, Potter & Hamilton, 2000; Sparks, 2000).

Leadership must extend beyond the principal if schools are to succeed in shared accountability settings. Teachers bring a level of expertise to instructional strategies and curricular issues that principals may not share. It is, therefore, essential that teachers share leadership for student achievement.

Professional development helps educators in low-performing schools gain data analysis skills. For teacher leadership to flourish, teachers must be prepared to analyze assessment data and plan appropriate student interventions (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; McDonald, 2001).

5. Providing professional development directly linked to the needs of the faculty to implement the instructional program. Schools improve student achievement by providing a strong professional development program aligned with student needs. Professional development may be delivered by traditional workshops and courses with support for implementation, as well

as through peer coaching, mentoring, and providing teachers the opportunity to collaborate in their learning. Site-specific professional development takes varied forms according to local needs and is closely aligned with the goals and strategies of the instructional program (Dana Center, 1999; Elmore, 2000; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992).

6. Providing additional learning time for students who need it. All students do not learn at the same rates. To help all students succeed, educators must plan accordingly. Schools must use ongoing classroom assessments to gauge student improvement and support individual student progress. Additional learning time may be warranted for students who have not reached mastery of standards (Glaes, 1998). The most successful intervention models provide continuous feedback to students, which reinforces their efforts and supports their continuous progress (Cotton, 2000; Dana Center, 1999; Levine & Lezotte, 1995; U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

Summary of Short-Term Strategies

Externally imposed accountability requirements, such as those often present in standards-based environments, can motivate schools to use these "jump-start" strategies, which may improve student achievement. However, to maintain momentum for improving student achievement, schools will need to take a longer-term view of improvement.

Long-Term Strategies

For school improvement efforts to be effectively sustained, long-term commitment is essential (Smith, 1999/2000). Three strategies effective for sustaining improvement are (1) determining the readiness of the faculty to change their practices; (2) developing and/or

affirming a common vision, mission, values, and beliefs; and (3) fostering faculty collaboration and distributed leadership. Supporting information is now provided for each strategy.

1. Determining readiness of the faculty to change current school practices. One predictor of school reform success is readiness to embrace the proposed change (Goldberg, 2000; Rosenholtz, 1989). Jump-start strategies, without readiness, are only marginally effective (Rand, 2000). Once the readiness of the school and community to implement change is determined, a plan can be devised for moving forward (Berman & Chambliss, 2000; Fullan, 2000; Levine & Lezotte, 1995).

2. Developing and/or affirming a common vision, mission, values, and beliefs. A cohesive schoolwide focus is the by-product of a shared vision, mission, and beliefs among school stakeholders. Once a shared focus has been realized, needs assessment data are analyzed to provide a solid basis for informed decision making about instructional issues (Kotter, 1990). A holistic, strategic, clearly outlined approach to improving the school is most effective (Aldersebaes, et al., 2000; Berman & Chambliss, 2000; Elmore, 2000; Newmann, et al., 2001; Purkey & Smith, 1983; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Sustainable change is most achievable when a holistic approach shares knowledge with all stakeholders (Sagor, 1992).

3. Fostering faculty collaboration and distributing leadership functions. Individuals in the school better support change efforts and feel more involved in reform when working collaboratively (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Whitford, 2000). The efforts of a single, strong leader may move a school forward with jump-start solutions, but distributed leadership and collaboration are essential if change is to be effectively implemented and sustained. Individual and collective ownership are natural by-products of collaborative efforts (Fullan & Stiegelbauer,

1991; Rosenholtz, 1989). The ownership of change brought about through collaboration fosters internal accountability (Dixon, 2000).

Extensive long-term research has been conducted on leadership styles. The principal is often central to the study of school leadership, yet there is a body of literature that strongly indicates principals must collaborate and distribute leadership functions (Berman & Chambliss, 2000; Elmore, 2000; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992; Hoy & Miskel, 1991; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Murphy, 1990).

A substantial body of leadership research has focused on how educators collaborate to distribute leadership throughout an organization (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939; Hall, Rutherford, Hord, & Huling, 1984; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Distributive leadership can include such strategies as using lead teachers in specific curriculum areas or designating teacher leadership roles on a school management or improvement team.

Components essential to distributed leadership include a common vision and clearly identified school goals and priorities. Distributed leadership is essential to maximizing student achievement (O'Neill, 2000; Teddlie & Stringfield, 1993; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Many instruments are available for assessing collaborative interactions and distribution of school leadership, e.g., Teddlie and Reynolds (2000).

Summary of Long-Term Strategies

The three long-term strategies just described identify positive school culture as elemental to the improvement of student achievement. When culture is attended to prior to introducing a reform or change effort, two things are more likely to occur. First, educators will have a better understanding of the instructional areas that need improvement (Ulrich, Zenger, & Smallwood,

1999; Sagor, 1992). This understanding will facilitate better decision making in the selection of reform models or instructional changes to be implemented. Second, the changes adopted by the school will have a better quality of implementation and a better chance of improving student achievement (Cotton, 2000).

Which schools benefit most from various kinds of interventions?

Instructional strategies used to improve student achievement vary from school to school and level to level (e.g., from elementary to middle school to high school), and may depend on the community setting. In looking at interventions with the highest potential for successful change, each school must be viewed as an individual case with its own strengths and challenges. It is evident that

- implementing change in a school depends more on the culture of the school than the grade levels or the community setting
- state and local policies, procedures, and practices can support or hinder the implementation of interventions
- external facilitation can assist school personnel in assessing needs and developing strategic improvement plans

Specific instructional strategies used to improve student achievement will necessarily vary from school to school and may depend on the community setting in which the school is located. For example, it is generally accepted that to improve student achievement at the elementary school level, it is important to focus on teaching primary grade students to read. However, the specific strategies used to teach reading may vary from school to school.

Each school, regardless of level or community setting, must be viewed as an individual case. Research indicates that (1) successfully implementing change interventions depends more on school culture than on grade level or community setting, (2) state and local policies can help

or hinder the successful implementation of interventions, and (3) external facilitation can assist schools in developing effective improvement plans. Each of these points is now discussed in greater detail.

1. Implementing change in a school depends more on the culture of the school than the grade level or community setting. When investigating interventions that will transform a low-performing school into a high-performing school, each school must be viewed as an individual case with its own strengths and weaknesses. The first step to selecting effective interventions is to analyze the school's needs (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). This analysis can be accomplished through formal and informal needs assessment approaches that include careful examination of student achievement data and school climate indicators (Newmann, et al., 2001; Purkey & Smith, 1983; U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

2. State and local policies, procedures, and practices can support or hinder implementation interventions. More significant than the community setting or grade level configuration of a school is the level of support provided by external sources, including state and local departments of education. Facilitating the work of the school by providing resources (both fiscal and human) is very important to successful selection and implementation of school reform initiatives (Dana Center, 1999; Education Commission of the States, 1999).

Policies, administrative procedures, and practices can support or hamper a school's success in initiating and sustaining improvement. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) contend that the most effective approaches to school improvement include both pressure and support. Pressure, in the form of accountability, is a common current practice.

Accountability based on clear and measurable standards can effectively serve as the framework for improvement efforts and provide the pressure needed to ensure that change

initiatives are taken seriously (Fullan, 2000; Council of Chief State School Officers, 1997). The most successful accountability systems also support schools' efforts to meet standards using a pressure-and-support approach (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991). Support may be delivered in various formats (e.g., professional development, external facilitators, additional resources) but must always meet the site-specific needs of the school.

3. External facilitation can assist school personnel in assessing needs and developing strategic improvement plans. External facilitators can help guide school personnel in assessing needs and developing strategic improvement plans. They can also play a role in assessing readiness for change and work with school leaders to build a culture that is supportive, sustainable, and focused on improving student achievement. External facilitators, knowledgeable in school culture and improvement planning processes, can assist in the implementation of both jump-start and long-term improvement strategies (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1997; Newmann & Wehlage, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

How can federal funds best be used to support school improvement?

Federal funds can be strategically targeted to help low-performing schools by

- using data to identify and clarify areas of the school program needing improvement
- developing an action plan to address the areas needing improvement
- looking at all fiscal and non fiscal resources available to support implementation of the action plan, including local, state, and federal funds
- developing implementation and maintenance measures

Fiscal resources, such as those provided by the federal government, may be strategically targeted in ways that are particularly helpful for low-performing schools. State and district fiscal resources may be integrated with federal appropriations into a comprehensive approach for school improvement that emphasizes student achievement. A guidebook for this process is the Kentucky Department of Education (1997) Consolidated Planning Process, which illustrates potential funding integration procedures. These include (1) using data to identify and clarify areas of the school program needing improvement, (2) developing an action plan to address the areas needing improvement, (3) looking at all fiscal and other resources available to support implementation of the action plan, and (4) developing implementation and maintenance measures. Each of these is discussed more fully below.

1. Using data to identify and clarify areas of the school program needing improvement. Key to devising a comprehensive approach to improving low-performing schools is clarification of problematic issues through data analysis (Holcomb, 1999; McDonald, 2001). Once data have been analyzed and priority needs identified, a realistic plan of action should be

developed and should include role expectations (e.g., principal, superintendent, teachers) (Chrispeels, et al., 1999; Holcomb, 1999).

2. Developing an action plan to address the areas needing improvement. Everyone who will be expected to implement the plan should be included in the planning process (Kentucky Department of Education, 1997; McDonald, 2001). Shared vision, common goals, and role clarity result from effective planning initiatives (McDonald, 2001). When educators share a vision, have clear goals, and understand their roles, implementation becomes more meaningful and the focus on student achievement is more specifically defined.

Analysis of federal regulations, which describe the intent of federal funding, can be a very informative activity for low-performing schools as they prepare their action plans (Clark, J. personal communication, April 1997). Federal programs target improvement of student learning and can be an integral part of a school plan.

3. Looking at all fiscal and other resources available to support implementation of the action plan, including local, state, and federal funds. The action plan should take into account all resources available to the school, including fiscal and human. Resources from federal, state, and local entities should be combined with school resources, which include human and time resources necessary for effective program implementation. The focus should remain on student needs through every step of the planning process, and students should be the focus of every discussion.

State and local requirements for planning and reporting should be in concert with federal funding requirements. Requiring low-performing schools, which may already have limited capacity to complete multiple plans and funding reports, could be counterproductive (Holcomb, 1999).

Analysis of the various federal, state, and local policies and regulations will reveal enormous flexibility for integration of funds and waivers for the use of funds, when warranted, to meet student needs. This will assist schools in integrating of funds under an action plan.

4. Developing measures of implementation and maintenance. Federal, state, and local funds are intended to assist schools in their efforts to improve student learning. The full potential of school plans will not be maximized, however, without clearly identifying and applying measures that indicate the effectiveness of implementation efforts. For implementation to be most effective, it must be monitored. Kentucky's Implementation and Impact Instrument provides one format for monitoring implementation (Kentucky Department of Education, 1997).

How are school districts responding to the need for leaders who can implement and sustain changes that result in high levels of student achievement?

Strong school leadership is very important to the work of improving low-performing schools. Leaders focus attention on student achievement as the work of the school and set the expectation that all students will achieve to high levels. School district administrators play a key role in developing school leaders and supporting their work. To ensure strong school leadership, school districts must

- provide professional development opportunities for school leaders
- develop leadership programs for aspiring school leaders
- establish a culture that encourages distributing leadership functions to members of the school and community

Strong district leadership is very important to the work of improving all schools, but especially important to schools that are low performing. No changes can succeed without ongoing pressure and support during the implementation process (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Schlechty, 1990). District leaders help focus attention on student achievement as the primary work of the school and set the expectation that all students will achieve to high levels (Levine & Lezotte, 1995).

School district administrators, therefore, play a key role in developing school leaders and supporting their work (Elmore, 2000). School leadership can be facilitated by (1) providing professional development opportunities for current school leaders, (2) developing leadership programs for aspiring school leaders, and (3) establishing a culture that encourages distributing leadership functions to members of the school and community.

1. Providing professional development opportunities for school leaders. In an environment of standards-based reform, a great deal of responsibility is placed on school principals to demonstrate accomplishment of high levels of student achievement. District administrators can ensure that ongoing professional development opportunities develop, enhance, and maintain the instructional leadership skills of school-level personnel. The most important skills for school-level leaders include (1) the use of data for school improvement, (2) strategic planning, and (3) leadership in the use of research-based curriculum, instruction, and assessment strategies (Levine & Lezotte, 1995; U.S. Department of Education, 1998; WestEd, 2000). Professional development that strengthens these skills and provides ongoing support during the process of implementation of the skills is essential and must be supported at the district level (D'Amico, Harwell, Stein, & van den Heuvel, 2001).

Engaging external facilitators to work with principals represents an effective form of professional development that is specific to the individual school leader and takes into account the site-specific school leadership needs. External facilitator assistance is particularly helpful with the implementation and application of new skills in the school setting (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1997; Education Commission of the States, 1999; Wolk, 1998).

2. Implementing and developing leadership programs for aspiring school leaders. The active recruitment and preparation of aspiring school leaders is another way district administrators can support effective school leadership (Richardson, 2000). Academies and training programs for new and aspiring school leaders can provide for the acquisition of skills and practices most helpful to instructional leadership. Mentoring programs also enhance the development of aspiring leaders. Providing a combination of training and mentoring programs is

especially effective. External facilitators can support the recruitment and development of aspiring leaders, while mentors can offer advice and support to enhance the skills needed to lead schools to high levels of student achievement (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1997; Education Commission of the States, 1999).

3. Establishing a culture that encourages distributing school leadership functions in schools. District administrators may support sustaining change by working with schools to ensure that leadership is distributed throughout the entire organization. While the principal plays a key role in school leadership, it is important to create stability in the school so that reform will be maintained through changes in administration. By distributing school leadership functions, teachers and other members of the staff take on key leadership roles, both formal and informal. Teacher leaders in specific curriculum areas and designated roles on a school leadership team are examples of how leadership can be distributed (Elmore, 2000). Roles evolve naturally when opportunities are provided for faculty and staff to meet frequently, participate in dialogue, and share their expertise. In this context, every member of the staff perceives ongoing leadership opportunities. Distributing school leadership functions helps develop a collaborative environment and also establishes stability through administration change (McDonald, 2001).

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